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STAT

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Editors tell CIA, hands off!

EVERYBODY KNEW about it except the editors.

American reporters are being used — again — as spies for the United States.

We found that out in Washington this month at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE).

Many editors listened in anger and disbelief as Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA, told us of the reporter-spies in his talk. He elaborated when questioned by stunned editors.

Turner said he announced the policy in 1977 and open hearings were held on it.

That policy, of using foreign correspondents as spies, had been abolished after it came to light in the Watergate era. Many other abuses of the CIA were abandoned at that time.

Turner's reinstituting of the policy, he said, aims to use newspaper reporters only if there is no alternative. He must give approval personally.

The admiral said he has authorized the use of three reporters — all of whom agreed to serve — as spies.

None was actually used. Times changed and the use of the reporters was not needed, he added.

Editors, led by Abe Rosenthal of the New York Times, Gene Patterson

of the St. Petersburg Times and Ken McMullen of the Miami Herald, led the protest.

Rosenthal was the most persistent, Patterson the most eloquent and McMullen the toughest.

Why shouldn't reporters help their country out? We imagine much of the public feels the way Adm. Turner does.

As the admiral put it, all the other countries use their press as foreign agents.

But we are not "other" countries. As editor Patterson said, besides our flag, maybe the only thing different about America is that our press is free.

How then can we keep it that way — if reporters are in the employ of the government? How can we believe reports coming from Iran and Afghanistan if those telling us about it and writing about it are paid informants of our government?

The government's generals lied to us for years in Vietnam, telling us we were winning when we weren't; telling us victory was just around the corner, when it wasn't.

Watergate has made it more difficult for us to believe our government officials. Not everything they have pronounced about Iran has been totally correct.

What is there left for the American public to believe — if our reporters

are really just civil service workers?

Turner made the point reporter-spies were told it would be a good idea if their editors knew about it. No editor at the meeting acknowledged having a spy on the staff so there goes that fail-safe mechanism.

There was the real threat that an editor would fire such a reporter. McMullen hinted strongly at it and there seemed to be silent approval from the crowd.

How badly were the "spies" needed? Not at all, it seems. The cases were serious enough that top officials recommended the action and Turner saw enough value in it to give the go-ahead. Yet the reporters weren't needed.

Somehow that suggests knee-jerk reaction by the CIA.

I don't think any editor is saying that a reporter who comes back to this country after a tour overseas can't tell his government what his experiences were like and what he thinks is going on over there.

But to spy for the government while writing believable copy for the American public — we say "never!"

Somehow the admiral is still at sea on this moral issue.

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Turner